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Statement submitted by Soroptimist International*

In his foreword to the UNOV/UNODC Strategy for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women 2018–2021 Director General Yury Fedotov says:

> *"Gender equality and the empowerment of women lie at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals, and they are vital to fully realizing the rights and potential of all persons".*

Soroptimist International as a leading global organization of women working together to advance the human rights and status of women and girls, supports and strongly advocates for gender equality.

Reports from the United Nations and Member States in recent years demonstrate increasing concerns about the growing menace of cybercrime and its impact on the lives especially of women and girls, but also children. Violence against women and girls takes place at home, in and around schools and workplaces, and now through new forms of technology and media, which has become an extension of the many forms of violence which women and girls are subjected to.

In 2017, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres observed that Violence Against Women and Girls was not confined to any particular political or economic system, but was prevalent in every society in the world. It cuts across boundaries of wealth, race and culture. It remains an expression of historically and culturally specific values and standards which are today still executed through many social and political institutions that foster women's subservience and discrimination against women and girls. Endemically, this translates into high levels of violence against women and girls.

This epidemic of violence had now also extended to reach into cyber space. The United Nations Secretary-General observed that women were now being "routinely targeted for intimidation and harassment in cyberspace and in real life. In the worst cases, extremists and terrorists built their ideologies around the subjugation of women and girls and singled them out for sexual and gender-based violence, forced marriage and virtual enslavement".

Soroptimist International calls on the Criminal Justice systems of Member States around the globe to take account of this massive increase in all forms of

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cybercrime, recognizing that for the most part the crimes are targeted at women and girls and frequently perpetrators are not being brought to justice.

In 2015, a report was released by the United Nations Broadband Commission which revealed that almost three quarters of women online have been exposed to some form of cyber violence, and urged governments and industry to work harder and more effectively together to better protect the growing number of women and girls who are victims of online threats and harassment.

Research shows that:

- Women in the age range of 18 to 24 are uniquely likely to experience stalking and sexual harassment in addition to physical threats via the Internet.
- One in five female Internet users lived in countries where harassment and abuse of women online is extremely unlikely to be punished.
- In many countries women were reluctant to report their victimization for fear of social repercussions.
- Governments, regulators, businesses and everyday Netizens alike need to recognize and act on the basic principle that an unsafe Internet will mean that women will frequent the Internet less freely, with costly societal and economic implications.

Changing social attitudes and norms is the first step to shifting the way online abuse is understood and the seriousness with which it is treated. There is a need for public education and education of enforcement agency staff, such as police.

Promotion of safeguards for online safety and equality on the Internet for women and girls is vital. Traditional Violence Against Women safety frameworks include women's shelters, crisis centres, help lines and education. The digital world also requires safety measures to keep up with a rapidly evolving Internet. This will necessarily require resources, attention and active participation of digital gatekeepers in industry, civil society and governments.

Sanctions need to be put in place as well as enforcement of through the courts and legal systems.

Soroptimist International commends those Member States which have begun to address the issue through, for example, the establishment of specialist national bodies for protection and safeguarding of women and children.

Soroptimist International calls on Member States:

- To develop, where necessary, new legislation and new ways of dealing with perpetrators and supporting victims of such crimes should be introduced by Member States.
- To encourage, where legislation already exists, law enforcement agencies to be more vigilant, as well as ensuring they are prepared to listen to the allegations and complaints of women and girls about cybercrimes. They should be held to account more visibly in reported cases where this clearly has not happened.
- To recognize the value of partnerships with NGOs where they can play a significant part in supporting victims of cybercrimes.
- To increase and develop further global cooperation across law enforcement agencies and criminal justice systems to prevent perpetrators hiding behind state boundaries.
- To ensure cooperation to develop consistent legal frameworks which deal with global corporate organizations such as social media giants which offer platforms for criminals to operate.

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